



'Sligo is a wet, tough environment. I'm engrossed in the landscape. I paint rain all the time'

Nick Miller in his mobile studio. He drives around the county, opens the van door and, from inside this shelter, paints his intricate, textured landscapes

the sligo studios

Rosita Boland hears from artists who have settled in Co Sligo about the things that drew them westward: prices, privacy and panoramas. Photographs: **Alan Betson**

These days, for artists, the west of Ireland – and Sligo particularly – is the place to be. In the past decade, an increasing number of creative artists have moved to Co Sligo. Among the writers now based there are novelists Pat McCabe, Eoin McNamee and Leland Bardwell, and poet Dermot Healy. Among the painters are Seán MacSweeney, who has possibly most made the county his own, with his luminous, striking seascapes and bog-pool paintings. Other painters in Sligo include Sinéad Aldridge, Pat Hall, Nick Miller, Ronnie Hughes, Barrie Cooke and Diarmuid Delargy.

So what brings these artists here in particular? After all, the sky is as wide, and the landscape as big and promising in other counties ...

NICK MILLER, originally from London, lives virtually next door to Cooke in country terms: just a couple of miles down the road, in the townland of Kilmactranny. He has been in Sligo since 1993, and lives here with his wife Noreen and sons Reuben (8) and Aaron (6). They originally came to Sligo from Dublin for a summer, renting a house in Tubbercurry. In typical Irish fashion, where everyone knows everyone else, he was first introduced to this part of Sligo by Cooke, who offered him the loan of his studio when he was abroad.

Miller liked the area so much that he and his wife went looking for their own house. He also liked Cooke's studio so much that he "cloned it", by building an identical one beside his pretty Victorian house. It's not his only studio, though. His other one is in a converted truck. This brilliantly simple concept means that the landscape

comes to Miller, who drives round Sligo, opens the doors at the back of the truck and then paints his intricate, densely-textured landscapes from the covered shelter of his mobile studio. He's currently finishing work on a show called *Genre*, for Kilkenny's Butler Gallery, which opens today.

Like Hughes, Miller was also partly attracted to Sligo because it was cheaper than Dublin. "Artists tend to follow studio space. And there's a privacy about the place that suits artists," he suggests. "It's nice to know there are other artists in the county, but you really have to be in the north-west for yourself. It's too hard a place to live in for no reason: you have to be self-sufficient here."

The Sligo landscape has seeped into all his work. "As soon as I moved out of Dublin, my levels of concentration changed. Sligo is a wet, tough environment. I'm completely engrossed in the density of the landscape. I paint the rain all the time. And I like making art in places where it doesn't matter. A painter doesn't matter in the countryside in the way a farmer does, for instance. That gives you great freedom."

Miller describes himself as being "completely absorbed in the landscape for the past 10 years". It's true. He doesn't just paint the landscape for a living, the landscape also feeds the family. Later, he shows me his quite wonderful vegetable garden full of corn, tomatoes, leeks, squash, courgettes, beans, chard, peas, fennel, tomatoes, and masses of herbs.

He might not see his fellow Sligo artists too often, but Miller says he really enjoys the times they do meet. "You have to fill up at the petrol pump of the brain every now and then," he says, grinning. Happily, that's one tank that oil prices will never affect. ♦

Nick Miller's exhibition, *Genre*, begins today in the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny. Ronnie Hughes is currently participating in a group show at the Graphic Studio, Temple Bar, Dublin